

Below the Lead Line

The Case of the Missing Magnate

Mr. Felix Boyd hooked his thumbs into the armholes of his vest, and surveyed with a semi-quizzical eye the Wall street magnate into whose private office he had, with an air of indolent interest, quietly sauntered.

"What are you afraid of, Gregson?" he asked, halting in a familiar way near the banker's desk.

It was barely 9 o'clock, yet Gregson of Gregson & Green, already was down for business. He long had been a figure in Wall street, this Gregson and his millions; and, just at this time, he was the figure. For his stupendous operations in Northern Traction had set the entire street agog.

Yet, that Gregson was a man of shrewdest methods, as well as artful power, men of the street had, on more than one occasion, learned to their bitter cost; and few were inclined to flatterly declare in the present instance that he did not know what he was about. Actions frequently speak louder than words, however, and the bitterness born of depleted bank deposits creates an angry thirst for revenge. Gregson's present mystification of the public over some coming deal in Northern Traction, by which lever he long had been lifting the stock at extraordinary strides, and finally had invited the opposition of an army of financial foes, resulting in the piling up of a short interest against him of colossal proportions.

Gregson had the name of being, at such times, a fiercely wicked antagonist. When it was up to him to make good, Gregson invariably was there with both feet. Nor in the present case had he showed the first sign of weakening. With aggressive confidence, backed with a buying power that appeared utterly inexhaustible, he never once had wavered under the repeated drives made at his new financial hobby-horse, until wisecracks not involved in the bitter conflict were beginning to drift remark with an amusement disinterested observers only can feel over one of Wall street's "mysteries," not that Gregson was the president of Northern Traction—as was really the case—but that Gregson was Northern Traction itself, and his associates therein only a lot of ciphers.

The actual facts concerning Northern Traction, however, of whatever they consisted, are not here essential; for they have only an indirect bearing upon the present visit and subsequent work of Mr. Felix Boyd in the exceedingly peculiar case now presented.

Gregson looked quickly up at him, somewhat surprised by his unexpected entrance, and more by his curious question.

"Afraid of?" he echoed, inquiringly. "Yes, Gregson," nodded Boyd, still smiling oddly. "Of what are you afraid?"

Gregson granted impatiently over his mail, at which he occasionally shook his head like a bated bull; but presently he snorted, like one a bit perplexed: "Afraid of, Boyd? Of God—and the Wall street bears?"

And then the magnate of Northern Traction threw himself back in his desk chair and gave way to a long, resonant laugh, which dispelled for a time, at least, the lines of care from his refined, resolute face—that of a man of nearly 60.

"Why, Boyd, my dear fellow," he presently cried, when he could govern his amusement, "what a curious question!"

"It emanates from a rather more serious impression on my part than you appear to imagine," said Felix Boyd, more gravely. "You should know, Gregson, that I am not one to idly intrude upon the time of a man as busy as yourself."

"So I do, Boyd, for a fact," the banker quickly answered. "What do you mean? Explain yourself."

"Have you any reason to fear a secret foe, Mr. Gregson, who would do you personal injury if he had a chance?"

Gregson laughed. "I have an abundance of foes, all right," he replied, significantly; "but I hardly think they are of the order of ruffians. No, no, Boyd; I know of no man who deliberately would do me personal injury. Why do you ask?"

"Because I discovered several days ago, Gregson, that you were being constantly shadowed by a man who—"

Gregson interrupted him with a laugh that made the room ring. "Ah, I see!" he exclaimed, when he could suppress his risibility. "You have discovered my shadow, eh? You have tumbled to Finley. Why, Boyd, dear fellow, that chap is my private bodyguard."

"Your bodyguard?" "Precisely—nothing less!" cried Gregson, who appeared immensely tickled over the idea, as well as by Boyd's manifest perplexity. "My bodyguard—yes, that's the term. I've had him at my heels for more than a week. Like the autocrat of all the Russias, I thus insure proper regard for my august person, which, as Northern Traction soars higher, certainly should command a corresponding degree of respect."

Boyd smiled only faintly. "Pshaw!" Gregson then added abruptly. "Lexity aside, Boyd, there's really nothing in this little discovery of yours. But I now see why you have called, and with so curious a question."

"Since you say it's all right, Gregson, of course it's no affair for me to meddle with," Boyd indifferently rejoined. "Egad to hear you say so. You are one of my clients, you know, over all of whom and whose interests I am employed to feel a constant care. Hence, when I discover anything out of the ordinary, I invariably look into it."

"Quite right, certainly, and very good of you."

"I observed, only by chance, that you were being watched by the party mentioned," Boyd deliberately explained, buttoning his coat, as if about to depart. "At old times I since have kept an eye on him, without his knowing it, and found that he was very persistent upon your track."

"Good enough!" laughed Gregson. "That speaks well for his devotion. Very glad to hear it."

"Still," added Boyd languidly, "I thought I'd drop in and learn what it signified."

"Perfectly right."

"Novel idea of yours, Gregson, this employing a man to watch over you. Not usual among men of your walk in life."

"True," smiled Gregson, with merely an upward glance from a letter he had begun reading. "Novel idea, indeed. But don't give me any credit for it, my dear Boyd. It was Finley's idea, not mine."

"That so?" queried Boyd, indifferently.

Yet he decided to linger briefly, and rested his elbow on the top of the banker's roll-top desk. Gregson did not

appear to mind. He continued reading his letters, one after the other, and in the meantime talked jerkily at intervals with his questioner.

"Yes, Finley's idea," said he. "No funeral of mine. Not so bad a scheme, at that—as you'll admit. Happened in this way—"

"Well?"

"What was I saying?"

"About how it happened, Mr. Gregson."

"Oh, yes! Met him just as I was coming in here one morning about a week ago—had seen him outside half-a-dozen times before. Wondered who he was—seemed sort of keeping an eye on me, as you say. So I let him have a few words with me, and he then explained that—"

"Humph! Phillip?"

"Yes, sir!" This from a clerk who came rushing in.

"Send Burton & Pollock a current certificate for ten thousand Northern Traction, and have it charged to loan account. Here—wait! Hand this letter to the cashier, and let him to advise the writer that we have ample time-money at our command. That's all now. Where was I at, Boyd?"

About the chap you met in the corridor, who—"

"Ah, yes! I stopped to hear what he had to say. He said he feared that I possibly noticed him at times—meant no harm in watching me, however. I asked him what his object was in so doing, and he then—he then explained that he—"

"I fear that I am encroaching on your time."

"Oh, no, you're not. I can talk with you while running through my mail."

"And he said?"

"Oh, he explained that he had been following the market for a time, and had come long on Northern Traction—at which I told him he was a wise young man."

"He said he believed, in a desultory fashion, 'He said he believed that I knew what I was doing, and would presently boom the stock well above par—wise again, you see! And you see if I don't. Then God help those shorts, when I finally put on the twisters. I'll squeeze 'em till they wish they had—Bah! What was I saying, Boyd?'"

"About what Finley said in explanation—"

"Of shadowing me—ah, yes! He said he was long of the stock, and at times worried by its occasional breaks. Darned bears, you see! Said he couldn't help dreading that something might happen to me—some mishap—that some enemy on the bear side of the market might attempt to put out my light. So he was keeping an eye on me most of the time, with a view to my personal safety—detective-like, you see."

"Ah, yes," nodded Boyd. "Precisely." "Idea rather pleased me, as well as his kindly interest, and I told him to go ahead—look after me as carefully as he liked," Gregson gladly went on, with his attention vacillating between his letters and his story, in which latter Felix Boyd was displaying only a cursory interest. "I told him I would pay him for his time, by the way, after I had worked this deal in Traction to a finish."

"Hired him, eh?" murmured Boyd. "Yes, in a way. Bright fellow enough, Boyd; so don't bother him. Full name, did you ask? Martin Finley. I think he said, 'Wait a moment! I believe I have his card here, if I haven't mislaid it. Ah! here it is—yes, Martin Finley. Evidently employed by the Metropolitan private detective bureau. Jacob Kelp, manager, Carls building, corner of—"

"—bt, here; take the card and read it yourself, if you like."

Boyd indifferently accepted the engraved card and silently read it. In the lower left corner the name of Martin Finley appeared in modest letters. Then he quietly replaced it upon Gregson's desk, remarking in careless tones:

"I had not thought of the fellow in that light, Gregson. Evidently he is a detective—one of the unofficial sleuths."

"Detective—yes, certainly," nodded Gregson over the letter he then was reading. "That's one reason why I quite favorably regarded the man and his suggestion to look after me."

"And it is a very good reason why he should not learn that I detected him in his excellent work, and regarded him with suspicion," said Felix Boyd quite pointedly. "A brother detective might feel hurt, Gregson, if he knew of it. You'd better say nothing to him about it, or about me."

"Very well."

"If he has seen me come here this morning, and later asks you any questions concerning my mission, you may state that I called on other business."

"Surely, Boyd, if you wish it," growled Gregson, with a first sign of impatience. "But I'm not likely to have any words with him—far from it. Haven't spoken to him, or he to me, since that first day."

Boyd laughed softly.

"You merely leave him to look after you in his own peculiar way, eh?"

"That's it, precisely."

"Not a bad idea, either," drawled Boyd. "I was a little blind, or I might have thought it. Sorry to have annoyed you, Gregson."

"No annoyance—none whatever. Call again, whenever you—Here, Phillip!"

"Yes, sir."

"Good morning, Gregson."

"Good morning, Boyd; good morning. Phillip, you telephone Vandyke Bros. that we will loan them Northern Traction flat, but subject to—"

Felix Boyd heard no more, for he had sauntered quietly out, as he had sauntered quietly in a short time before. He appeared, moreover, utterly oblivious to the existence of Martin Finley, the banker's voluntary guard, whom he presently saw loitering in the public corridor adjoining the elaborate offices of Messrs. Gregson & Green.

He was not a bad-looking fellow, on the whole, this Finley; plainly not more than 25 years of age, with a beardless and rather youthful face, quite frank of expression. If he was speculating in Northern Traction, as he had stated, it seemed quite probable that one of his years and inexperience might be a victim to the apprehensions mentioned, and that he really felt a genuine care over the magnate in whose glowing predictions and bullish operations his own hopes and prospects were involved. In a way, his story was plausible enough; and, since Gregson plainly was satisfied with it, why should another interfere? Indeed, Mr. Felix Boyd had no immediate intention of so doing.

During the following month, however, Boyd occasionally noticed that young Finley still was engaged in his good work, and that neither his looks nor his actions invited serious suspicion.

Upon entering his Pine street office one morning Boyd found Jimmie Coleman, his intimate friend of the central office, reading one of the morning papers, and smoking a very black and malodorous cigar.

"Goodness, Jimmie!" exclaimed Boyd, sniffing the air with a grimace. "What are you smoking—a piece of rope?"

Coleman laughed loudly and tossed the offensive weed into a cuspidor.

"Not exactly, Felix," said he. "I've been trying for some time to decide just what brand it is."

"It smells like a burning rag."

"It was given to me by Darby, at headquarters; so I thought I'd take one chance with it," laughed Coleman. "But never again! I've often wondered why Darby has so few intimate friends. Your boy, Terry, has just run out for a few minutes. Have you seen the morning paper?"

"Not yet," replied Boyd, slipping into his office coat. "Anything in it worth telling?"

"Only a hot time in the market yesterday. The bears got after Gregson with an ax and gave him an awful shaking."

"That so?" queried Boyd, filling his pipe.

"They knocked Northern Traction off nine points, and it closed at the lowest."

"Humph! That looks bad for Gregson."

"The bears caught the stop-loss orders of a lot of Gregson's blind followers and gave the stock quite a rattling. It doesn't surprise me any. I've been expecting it."

"Why so, Jimmie?"

"Chiefly because of past observations," explained Coleman. "I never knew a stock to be boomed on a mystery, so-called, that a crash did not follow the boom. Gregson has bullied Northern Traction well above par, and all on the strength of something favorable that's going to happen. Why the deuce doesn't he state what the deal is to be? It may be all right, you know; I don't say it isn't. But it certainly has a fishy look."

"Gregson is not a man easily downed," observed Boyd thoughtfully.

"That's true enough," admitted Coleman. "He's as steady as Gibraltar against raids that would have demoralized a less aggressive and resourceful operator. This paper states that he bought a thousand shares yesterday after the market, at two points above the closing; but I reckon that was a move only to steady the opening this morning. He is still predicting higher prices, but it's my opinion that a crash is about due."

"You seem quite confident of it, Jimmie."

"Because I know that a strong bear pool is now at work, of which Jack Pollock is the head and front," replied Coleman. "Pollock is a head and front, a buck against, particularly when he has a raft of other men's money to work with. There were rumors galore last night after the break. Some say Gregson is going to pieces mentally under the strain. He looks badly enough, for a fact. Pollock boasts that he will put the stock to fifty, a drop of more than sixty points."

"Humph!" grunted Boyd, rather contemptuously. "I don't fancy Pollock. He's capable of any sort of a dirty move that would enable him to make a profitable turn in the market."

"What of Gregson?"

"There is no comparison between them," replied Boyd, promptly. "Gregson is a big and brainy man, and Pollock never saw the day that he was in Gregson's class. As for Gregson's methods with Northern Traction, and his so-called mystery, I have an idea that it is all right, and that Gregson knows what he is about. It's not always feasible, you know, to make advance publications of as big a deal as might be made with Northern Traction."

"That may be true."

"Well, this break of nine points will give the shorts a chance to cover."

"Cover be blowed!" laughed Coleman. "There'll be mighty little covering done at the present level, you can gamble on that. Pollock and his push have been on the short side from the start, and only a genuine crash can let them out with whole skins. If Gregson can hold the market, he yet may win out; but it now looks to me—"

"Well, well, my money goes on Gregson," interposed Boyd. "He's one of my clients, Jimmie, and I cannot go back on them. It's my private opinion that Gregson is all right."

"Well, there'll be a mighty hot time in today's market, you can go the limit on that," declared Coleman.

"No doubt," assented Boyd, thoughtfully. "By the way, Jimmie, did you ever hear of the Metropolitan Private Detective bureau of this city?"

Coleman looked quickly up at this abrupt turn of the talk, and presently nodded in the affirmative.

"Yes, Felix; I have heard of it."

"Do you know anything about the concern?"

"Not a great deal," said Coleman. "It is managed by a man named Kelp, I believe. Properly licensed, I understand, but not identified with the official forces. It's all right, guess."

"Ever seen the manager, Kelp?"

"I don't think so. I never bother with these unofficial—Hello! what's coming?"

The fall of hurried feet were sounding on the corridor stairs, and in a minute the door of Boyd's office was thrown violently open, and a young man entered, wild-eyed and white with excitement.

"Thank heaven I find you here, Mr. Boyd!" he cried, breathlessly. "You're wanted at once—at our office—Gregson & Green! Gregson is almost crazy! Come at once, if you possibly—"

"Stop a bit!" coolly demanded Felix Boyd. "What is wrong at your office?"

"Something has happened to Gregson! He cannot be found!"

Boyd rose quickly to his feet, and came out of his office coat.

"Missing! Gregson missing!" he cried, with an ominous knitting of his brows. "Since when, Phillip?"

"Not sure about it—some time last night, I think," hurriedly replied the clerk, who was the same Boyd had seen in Gregson's office a month before.

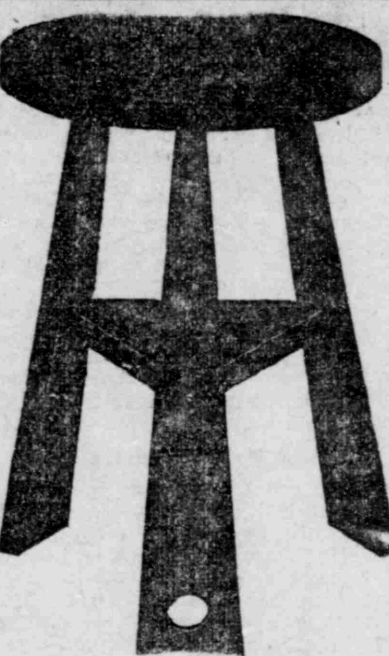
"Wasn't he at home last night?"

"Yes, sir, till early evening. Not there this morning. His wife just telephoned to Mr. Green—blessed if I know what, sir! Only know that Mr. Green was knocked almost daffy, and yelled for me to bring you without an instant's delay. Can't you come at once, sir?"

The face of Felix Boyd was growing strangely drawn and hard, as of one deeply stirred and bitterly determined. For all of thirty seconds he stood absolutely motionless, speaking not a word, but with his dilated eyes frowning at the floor at his feet. If one could have snapped a photograph of his brain, one would have pictured a mental riot—that of a man who hurriedly measured each and every possibility



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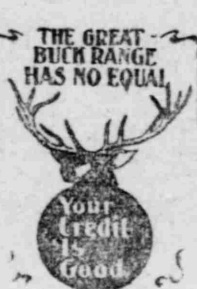
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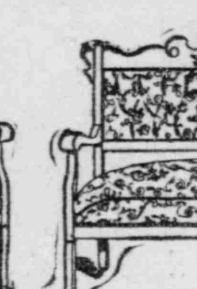
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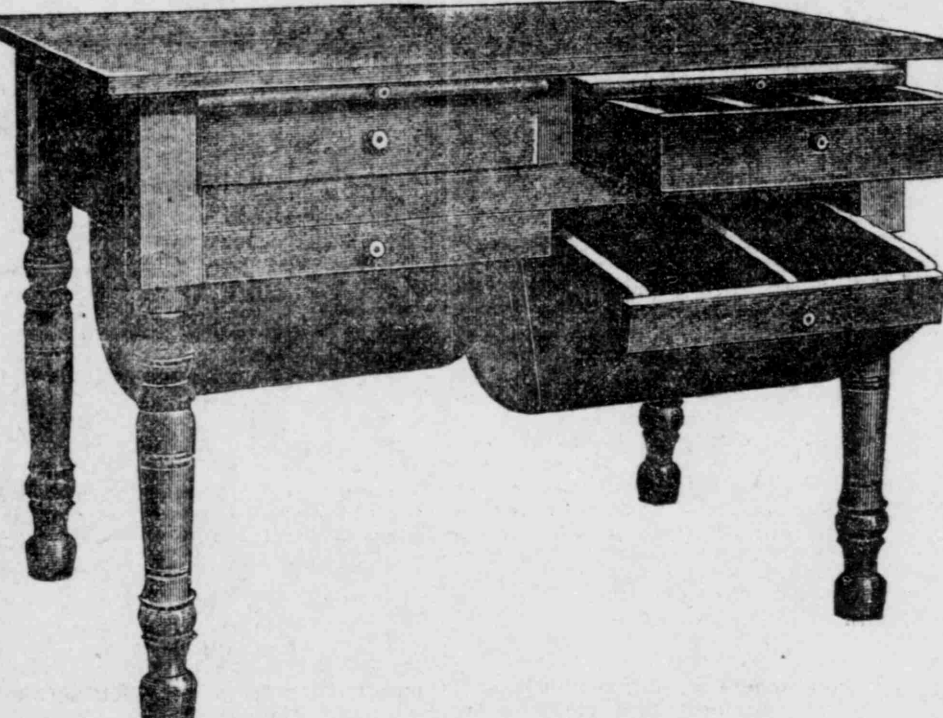


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